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AUTHOR Satcher, Jamie
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ABSTRACT

Persons with learning disabilities are choosing to attend college in increasing numbers. They bring with them special needs that must be met if they are to be successful. Federal legislation mandates that education programs receiving federal funds cannot discriminate against persons with disabilities. This places the burden of accommodation on the institution. Many colleges and universities are meeting the needs of learning disabled students through special programs. However, learning disabled students must choose carefully the colleges they attend and the classes they take to reap full benefits from these programs. They must also be willing to disclose their handicap to be eligible for these programs. High school counselors can play a major role in helping learning disabled students to make wise decisions when choosing colleges by serving as advocates and facilitators in the school-to-college transition of these students. In developing appropriate programs of educational services for learning disabled students, thorough assessment of their strengths, limitations, and needs should be conducted. Choosing courses that will meet these students' needs is a priority after college entrance. Social deficits and lack of social support are major areas of concern for learning disabled students. This group of students has special concerns related to their career development. Counseling services specifically for learning disabled students can meet these needs. (ABL)

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LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS: MAKING THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE LIFE

Jamie F. Satcher, M.Ed.
Department of Counselor Education
Mississippi State University
P.O. Drawer GE
Mississippi State, MS 39762
(601) 325-3331

CG 022605

RUNNING HEAD: LD college students

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Abstract

Students with learning disabilities (LD) are entering colleges and universities in increasing numbers. They have unique needs which must be addressed if they are to be successful in college. Several concerns facing LD college students and solutions for meeting their needs are explored.

LEARNING DISABLED STUDENTS: MAKING THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE LIFE

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (PL 93-112) prohibits agencies and institutions receiving federal funds from discriminating against persons with disabilities. From a higher education perspective, Section 504 mandates that disabled persons receive equal access to educational programs and activities. According to Stone (1985), extensive services are now available at colleges and universities for physically disabled students. However, the needs of learning disabled (LD) students have not been as fully addressed.

Persons with learning disabilities have special needs which must be met if they are to be successful in a college setting (Miller, McKinley, & Ryan, 1979). As increasing numbers of LD students choose to attend colleges, special programs must be developed to serve them (Decker, Polloway, & Decker, 1985; Levinson, 1986; Rosthein, 1986). Johnston (1984) reported a trend in the United States of colleges and universities developing programs for LD students. Students with learning disabilities and persons working with them need to be aware of

their needs and methods to assist them in the transition to college life.

Special Needs of Learning Disabled Students

Identification and Assessment

Identification of LD college students can be difficult. Although more LD students are choosing to attend college, they are not required to inform colleges of their disability. In addition, they may not be aware of services available for them at the college level. Learning disabled students may also be afraid of disclosing their handicaps for fear of discrimination. Allard, Dodd, and Peralez (1987) discussed three stages that LD students may go through before their needs are recognized: hideout, trapped, and crisis. During the hideout stage, LD students give the illusion that they are having no problems in classes. Although they are regular in class attendance, they begin to fall behind in coursework and avoid assignments. The second stage, trapped, occurs after the reality of poor performance on initial examinations. The crisis stage generally happens toward the end of the first semester when LD students are faced with failure. At this point, they may seek out help.

However, it may be too late for them to pass the subjects they are already taking.

Guildroy (1981) suggested that this problem could be alleviated at the secondary school level by careful advisement of college bound LD students by school counselors. He recommended that LD students be made aware of special programs offered by colleges and universities. In turn, colleges and universities need to make this information readily available to school counselors. Although Section 504 prohibits colleges and universities from requiring persons with disabilities to disclose their disabilities upon application, this disclosure can be voluntary and LD students should be encouraged to provide this information to be eligible for special programs.

In developing appropriate programs of educational services for LD students, thorough assessments of their strengths, limitations, and needs should be conducted. Although many LD students have been evaluated prior to entry into college, additional assessments may be required to provide more information for planning educational strategies. Vogel (1982) advocated that this evaluation be extensive and include assessment of receptive and expressive oral language, auditory functioning, visual perception, memory, mathematics reasoning,

and mathematics computation. In addition, neurological examinations and EEG studies may be needed. Because of the emphasis placed on writing skills and oral language at the college level, this extensive evaluation can serve as a basis for determining needed accommodations or remedial services.

Choosing the Right College

Deciding which college to attend can be one of the most important decisions of the LD student's life. The college must be able to meet the academic intervention and psycho-social needs of LD students. Michael (1987) discussed many factors which LD students should consider when evaluating a potential college. Included among these factors is information about the services provided directly for LD students, such as counseling and basic study skills classes; access to support services, such as tutors, computers, and video-taped lectures of courses; modifications allowed by the college, such as extended class time, untimed examinations, and modified admissions procedures; student support groups that assist students in making friends; and listings of outside services and support groups for use by LD students.

Rogan (1987) recommended that high school counselors play a primary role in helping LD students choose an appropriate college. He suggested that they maintain contact with college disabled student support services personnel and that they research the support services available at potential colleges. By supervising the application process for LD students, high school counselors can assist them in the selection of an appropriate college and can help to alleviate some of the transitional problems LD students may encounter.

Choosing Courses

Once LD students have entered college, choosing courses that will meet their needs becomes a priority. Patton and Polloway (1987) reported that LD students have two barriers to overcome when choosing college courses: (a) emphasis on listening, reading, oral expression, writing, test-taking, and various study skills and (b) negative attitudes of faculty and staff toward them. They provided guidelines which LD students could use in evaluating college courses. For example, they recommended that LD students become aware of materials which will be used in a course, the format of content presentation, instructional techniques used, personality traits of the

professor that might affect student success in the class, the student's responsibilities both in and out of the class, how the student will be evaluated, and the acceptable standards of behavior set by the professor. By evaluating these areas, LD students could better determine the appropriateness of a particular class.

Evaluating faculty attitudes toward LD students is extremely important if LD students are to be successful in college classes. Minner and Prater (1984) reported a prevalent attitude among college faculty that LD students could not benefit from university or college training. They conducted a study of 210 faculty members in three Midwestern universities and found that the faculty members surveyed were not optimistic about the abilities of LD students. Stone (1985) reported that the major problem facing LD college students is a negative attitude among faculty toward them. Because attitudinal change occurs slowly, LD students may be well advised to seek out professors who are willing to accommodate them in the classroom and avoid those who will not. Early evaluation of a professor's attitude could mean the difference between success and failure in a class.

Social Adjustment

Social deficits and lack of social support are major areas of concern for LD students. They may have difficulty in adjusting to the social expectations of a college environment. Rosenthal (1985) reported that LD students may have an attitude of learned helplessness which must be overcome if they are to succeed in college. Gelb, Guzzardi, and Genova (1981) indicated that, when participating in academic therapy, LD students spent at least part of their therapy time discussing problems encountered in daily living.

According to Orzek (1984), LD college students may be several years behind their non-disabled peers in emotional and social adjustment. This may lead to withdrawal, aggressiveness, or sexually inappropriate behaviors. As a solution, she recommended that peer support groups be developed to help LD students adjust socially in college. Through peer group intervention, LD students could be assisted in managing their emotions, developing independence, establishing appropriate self-concepts, developing interpersonal relationships, developing social competence, and establishing standards by which they could judge and change their own behaviors.

Decker, Polloway, and Decker (1985) discussed a different approach to the social adjustment of LD college students. Their approach focused on relaxation, modifying thinking processes, and training in study skills and test-taking. They advocated a process that utilized both peer groups and individual counseling to help LD students in developing rational beliefs, managing stress, developing effective study habits, and reducing test anxiety.

Career Development

Learning disabled college students have the same concerns about career development as do non-disabled college students. However, they may have special concerns related to their disabilities and may not have adequate knowledge about careers to make appropriate career decisions. Rosenthal (1985) described several concerns which affect LD student's career decision making and discussed a career development class offered at Kingsborough Community College. One concern is that LD students may have cognitive and attentional impairments that make it difficult for them to understand the concept of career and career options. Another concern is that many LD students have poor self-concepts which must be addressed before they make career decisions. Using small groups, knowledge application,

peer counseling, and visual imagery, Rosenthal taught LD students about careers and had them develop career goals. Learning disabled students in the class learned how to gather career information and systematically make career decisions.

Summary

Persons with learning disabilities are choosing to attend college in increasing numbers. They bring with them special needs that must be met if they are to be successful. Federal legislation mandates that educational programs receiving federal funds cannot discriminate against persons with disabilities. This places the burden of accommodation on the institution.

Many colleges and universities are meeting the needs of LD students through special programs. However, LD students must choose carefully the colleges they attend and the classes they take to reap full benefits from these programs. They must also be willing to disclose their handicap to be eligible for these programs. High school counselors can play a major role in helping LD students to make wise decisions when choosing colleges by serving as advocates and facilitators in the school to college transition of these students.

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